

Transcript

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LBJ Goes to War (1964-1965)

 3 of 11 **PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY:**

January 20, 1961: Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty...

September 2, 1963: ...These people who say that we ought to withdraw from Vietnam are wholly wrong, because if we withdrew from Vietnam, the Communists would control Vietnam. Pretty soon Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya would go, and all of Southeast Asia would be under the control of the Communists and under the domination of the Chinese...

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, August 3, 1965:

If this little nation goes down the drain and can't maintain her independence, ask yourself, what's going to happen to all the other little nations?

TIGER SQUADRON HELICOPTER GUNSHIP CROSSTALK:

Voice #1: This is Roger 26 receiving fire 9:00, yellow smoke, 200 meters, automatic weapons, over.

Voice #2: This is 21...

NARRATOR: Lyndon Johnson inherited America's commitment to an anti-Communist government in South Vietnam, and 16,000 military advisers. Some were more than advisers in the war against the Communist-led insurgents, the Vietcong.

TIGER SQUADRON CROSSTALK:

Voice #2: Tigerlee, Tigerlee, Tiger 6, Tiger 6

Voice #1: This is 26.

Voice #1: This is 26. We have some people running along the dikes. Actually the canal is perpendicular to the one you're attacking now. They have on black uniforms, estimate approximately three zero. Do you have them in sight? Over.

Voice #2: This is 23. Roger. We have them in sight. We are engaging them at the present time.

Voice #1: Roger.

Voice #2: Good job. I saw you splatter one right in the back with a rocket.

Voice #1: Roger. Got lucky I guess.

NARRATOR: Johnson's main concern at the time was not this growing war in Asia, but another war at home.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, January 1964:

And this administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America.

NARRATOR: Few American presidents have been as successful as Johnson in promoting their programs in Congress. He later called his "The Great Society."

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, June 1964:

We are going to build a great society, where no man or woman are the victim of fear or poverty or hatred. Where every man and woman has a chance for fulfillment and prosperity and hope.

NARRATOR: But there was Vietnam. As Johnson took office, peasants, often helped by the Vietcong, destroyed the strategic hamlets designed to isolate them from the Vietcong. President Diem had built them, but now Diem was dead. And the structure he had created with American support was being smashed.

General Minh had ousted Diem with American approval. He lasted three months. General Khanh, with American blessing, took over in a bloodless coup. The political turmoil deepened.

NARRATOR: President Johnson offered America's full support to this new, untried leader.

ROBERT MCNAMARA: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. General Taylor and I have known General Khanh for a considerable period of time. He has our admiration, our respect and our complete support.

NARRATOR:

McNamara barnstormed South Vietnam with Khanh, trying to promote him to his own people. Privately McNamara was gloomy. He warned Johnson that the Vietcong controlled 40 percent of the countryside.

ROBERT MCNAMARA: We are here to emphasize that the United States will maintain its interest and its presence in your country. There is no question whatsoever of our abandoning that interest. We'll stay for as long as it takes. We shall provide whatever help is required to win the battle against the Communist insurgents.

NARRATOR: To the Communists in Hanoi, America's presence in the South was yet another act of foreign aggression. They recalled 1,000 years of struggle against foreign invaders: Chinese, Japanese, French. And now they faced Americans.

Ho Chi Minh stepped up his support for the Vietcong at the same time Johnson renewed the American commitment to defeat them. Each responded to the chaos in the South with new resolve.

COLONEL BUI TIN: During the final months of 1963, Diem was shot and Kennedy was assassinated. So the situation in the South changed. Just at that time, President Ho Chi Minh called on all Vietnamese to double their efforts to help the people in the South. The resistance forces in the South were still very weak and badly equipped. In certain areas, they had trouble recruiting troops. Therefore, we decided that well-equipped and larger forces had to be sent to the South.

NARRATOR: Hanoi decided to escalate the war. And the Vietcong stepped up their attacks in the countryside.

JAMES THOMSON (National Security Council staff): When Lyndon Johnson inherited the presidency, he inherited many things, but one of them was the legacy of the Vietnam War and the Democratic president's felt-need not to lose one square foot of territory to communism, particularly in Asia. To draw the line, to hold the line and to keep the presidency thereby, because if you lose, the final domino in the domino sequence is not some Asian country, it's the presidency itself.

NARRATOR: In 1964 the pressure on Johnson to hold the line against communism came from Republican conservatives. In July they nominated Senator Barry Goldwater for president. He was an outspoken anti-Communist.

SENATOR BARRY GOLDWATER, July 1964:

I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice...

NARRATOR: Johnson wanted a big victory. And he wanted to keep Vietnam out of the campaign. As early as May he had his aides draft a resolution of Congressional support for the war effort.

JAMES THOMSON: It was discovered, however, in researching the Senate that the introduction of such a resolution would cause a very major filibuster by two or three strong opponents of the war at the time and, therefore, do more harm than good, create not consensus but conflict. Therefore, by June 15, 1964, the idea of a resolution had been shelved.

NARRATOR: In late July, the U.S.S. *Maddox*, a destroyer on an intelligence mission, sailed into the Gulf of Tonkin off North Vietnam. It was later joined by the U.S.S. *Turner Joy*. These two destroyers became involved in an incident which brought the Congressional resolution off the shelf. The Navy explained the incident this way:

U.S. NAVY FILM:

In international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, destroyers of the United States Navy are assigned routine patrols from time to time. Sunday, August the 2, 1964, the destroyer Maddox was on such a patrol. Shortly after noon, the calm of the day is broken as general quarters sound.

In a deliberate and unprovoked action, three North Vietnam PT boats unleash a torpedo attack against the Maddox. At once, the enemy patrol boats are brought under fire by the destroyer.

NARRATOR: The film charged an unprovoked attack. But it left out crucial facts. Early in the morning of July 31, unmarked South Vietnamese patrol boats had attacked two North Vietnamese island bases -- part of a covert operation supported by the CIA. The next night the *Maddox* was cruising up the coast, at one point as close as five miles. It changed course. And early on August 2 was ten miles off one of the islands raided earlier. North Vietnam's patrol boats attacked the *Maddox* six hours later.

Hanoi linked the *Maddox* to the South Vietnamese raids.

NARRATOR: At the time Secretary McNamara stressed that the *Maddox* was simply on a routine patrol.

ROBERT MCNAMARA: No, it has no special relationship to any operations in that area. We're carrying routine patrols of this kind on all over the world all the time.

U.S. NAVY FILM:

Following the Sunday attack, the Maddox is joined by the U.S.S. Turner Joy. As directed by the President of the United States, the Maddox and Turner Joy resume patrol operations in the Gulf of Tonkin. On the night of August the 4th, North Vietnamese patrol boats strike again, as filmed in this re-creation.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, August 1964:

The determination of all Americans to carry out our full commitments to the people and to the government of South Vietnam will be redoubled by this outrage. Yet our response, for the present, will be limited and fitting. We Americans know, although others appear to forget, the risk of spreading conflict. We still seek no wider war.

NARRATOR: For the first time, American aircraft bombed North Vietnam. The retaliation came after the second incident -- an incident Hanoi has always denied.

GENERAL PHUNG THE TAI: On the night of August 4, the United States made public that so-called "Gulf of Tonkin incident." But the story was a fabrication, created by the U.S. National Security Council. Even as the National Security Council met, American aircraft were being sent to destroy several areas of our country. In reality, the second Gulf of Tonkin incident never happened.

RAY CLINE: At that time, I felt it was questionable whether the second incident took place. I simply was not sure. It was not until after a number of days of collation of reports from the field had taken place that many of the reports which seemed to relate to the second incident were proved either to be unsound or to relate to the first incident.

This is what intelligence analysis is all about, and in a military situation, quite often the commanding officers -- in this case, the President of the United States -- don't wait for the details to be settled if they feel they are in a critical situation with a danger of military conflict. They make decisions without waiting for the intelligence detail.

BILL MOYERS (Presidential aide): He felt that it represented, if not an escalation of the war on their part, at least a punch in the nose in a way that would humiliate a great power if it didn't respond. All of this went through his mind. And he also saw it as one dramatic way in which after weeks and months of seeming indecision, he could convey to Hanoi, to Saigon, and to the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, that you were not dealing with a softie.

MAN-ON-THE-STREET INTERVIEWS:

First Man: Well, I think that President Johnson has done the correct thing. I really do.

Second Man: I don't think that he could have done otherwise. Especially when they attacked the American flag, yeah.

Third Man: I'm behind him on it. I'm not for Johnson. I'm for Goldwater. But I'm behind him on this.

JAMES THOMSON: The minute incident number one happened, the attack on our ships, the resolution was brought right back off the shelf, put right to Congress and of course, after incident number two, sailed through with virtually no dissent. A blank check.

NARRATOR: Senator William Fulbright, persuaded that the second incident had occurred, whisked the resolution through Congress in two days.

SENATOR WILLIAM FULBRIGHT, September 1964:

Well, I think it's a very clear demonstration of the unity of the country behind the policies that are being followed by the President in South Vietnam, and more specifically, of the action that was taken in response to the attack upon our destroyers. It shows a practically unanimous approval. It was unanimous in the House, and only two dissented in the Senate.

SENATOR WAYNE MORSE:

Being in the minority never proves that you're wrong. In fact, history is going to record that Senator Greuning and I voted in the interest of the American people this morning when we voted against this resolution.

And I'd have the American people remember what this resolution really is. It's a resolution which seeks to give the President of the United States the power to make war without a declaration of war.

NARRATOR: Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Congress gave the President full authority for military action in Southeast Asia. Backed by both political parties, Johnson had removed the war as an issue from the campaign.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, October 1964:

In the White House for the last 20 years, five Presidents from both parties have adopted a bi-partisan foreign policy. That bi-partisan foreign policy has kept us out of war and it's kept us at peace, and it's left your boy at home. And that's the way it ought to be...

And that's the way it's going to be after November the 3rd.

BILL MOYERS: Johnson didn't seek a wider war. He didn't want a wider war. He knew the war would engulf everything that he wanted to do in this country. At the same time, he also knew that if he didn't fulfill what he thought was an honorable commitment from the United States to South Vietnam, his administration could be lost as well.

Barry Goldwater began after the nomination to try to be Mr. Moderate, Mr. Respectable. He tried to stand more in the center of the Republican Party than on the far right.

And the President said to me one day, "We've got to remind people of what Barry Goldwater was B.C. -- Before the Convention."

LYNDON B. JOHNSON CAMPAIGN COMMERCIAL:

Girl in Campaign "Daisy Commercial": Five, seven, six, six, eight, nine, nine.

Commercial Voice: Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero.

Lyndon B. Johnson: These are the stakes. To make a world in which all of God's children can live. Or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die.

Commercial Voice: Vote for President Johnson on November 3. The stakes are too high for you to stay home.

NARRATOR: Thus Johnson portrayed Goldwater as irresponsible and himself as the candidate of restraint. He won a landslide victory.

On the eve of the election, the Vietcong attacked an American airbase near Saigon. They destroyed aircraft used in operations against them. More planes had been sent after the Tonkin incidents. Escalation was breeding escalation.

AMBASSADOR MAXWELL TAYLOR: I recommended a retaliatory air strike for the bombing of Bienhoa airbase which was occupied largely by American aircraft, and the losses in personnel were all American. This was the first time the enemy had ever, had ever attacked a major military installation of the Americans. It was a change of tactics. It shouldn't be shrugged off, I thought, as just another thing -- incident of the war. It was something new, and it was an excellent reason to have a retaliatory strike.

NARRATOR: American carriers were poised. But President Johnson

refused his ambassador's recommendation to bomb North Vietnam. The Vietcong attacked again.

NGUYEN THANH XUAN: At the end of November, I was given the order to attack the Brink's Hotel which housed high American officers. All the crimes committed by the Americans were directed from this nerve center. I sat in a nearby cafe to wait for the explosion, which occurred at exactly five forty-five on the afternoon of December 24, the anniversary of the founding of the People's Army of Vietnam. Our commanders had ordered us to attack the place when the most Americans were there. And it was precisely as we had expected, since they were at the Brink's Hotel to plan their Christmas activities. Many Americans had also gone there from the Rex Hotel. As a result, the attack succeeded and we were never detected.

NARRATOR: The Christmas Eve attack was the second major assault on Americans in two months. Ambassador Taylor called once more for a bombing strike against the North. Again, Johnson refused.

MAXWELL TAYLOR: Again, recommended retaliation, got turned down. I felt reasonably sure, who wants to bomb Santy Claus?

NARRATOR: Four days after the Vietcong team blew up the Brink's Hotel, two Vietcong regiments prepared to strike the village of Binh Gia near Saigon. They inflicted the first of a series of devastating defeats on Saigon's army.

GENERAL WILLIAM C. WESTMORELAND: This was the use of battalion sized units, reinforced battalion sized units, by the enemy, and the successful use that I feared would spread and was perhaps the beginning of a gradual movement toward a major effort, using not guerrillas, not small units, but large units.

DEAN RUSK (Secretary of State): It was not until we were presented with a larger war that the decisions then had to be made as to whether we would let them get what they were after or whether we would make a greater effort ourselves.

NARRATOR: National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy already favored a greater effort when he arrived in Saigon in early February 1965. He had recently urged the President to bomb North Vietnam.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:, February 1965:

The President has asked me to extend the New Year's greeting to all the people of Vietnam and to express his conviction that the Year of the Snake can be one in which security and prosperity grow in Vietnam.

NARRATOR: While McGeorge Bundy was in Saigon, the Vietcong attacked an American outpost at Pleiku, in the Central Highlands. It was the third attack on Americans in three months. Eight died. One hundred twenty-six were wounded.

MCGEORGE BUNDY: We found our friends in Washington on the wire, and they wanted our recommendation. It took us a little while to concert a view which was that this episode did call for a reply.

NEWSREEL, February 1965:

In the first raid, land-based planes were forced back by the weather, but the carrier jets completed their strike with the loss of one American plane. Later, photo-reconnaissance flights prove that much of the staging area had been completely destroyed.

The confrontation between the Reds and the West was the most critical since the Gulf of Tonkin incident last summer, when the U.S. replied just as swiftly to North Vietnam PT boat attacks.

NARRATOR: A few days later, Johnson gave the green light to sustained bombing in North Vietnam. He hoped to bolster Saigon's morale. But there was a coup attempt in Saigon on February 19. The bombing was to begin the next day coordinated with the Saigon government. Ambassador Taylor cancelled it. The government was in turmoil. In fact, it had been in turmoil for months. When Khanh took advantage of the Tonkin incidents the previous August to tighten his grip, students had rioted. Buddhists also protested. But demonstrating Buddhists threatened the Catholics. They staged a sit-down strike. After ten days, Khanh formed a triumvirate to try to rule South Vietnam. Four days later, Khanh resigned. He said he was ill.

SAIGON INTERVIEW, September 1964:

Reporter: Who is the man who can lead Vietnam to victory?

Nguyen Oanh: Well, I think you've got me there.

NARRATOR: Acting Prime Minister Nguyen Oanh, a Harvard-educated economist, lasted three days. Then Khanh returned.

GENERAL KHANH, August 1964:

Although I have not yet quite recovered from my illness, I do my best to return today to assume the responsibility of leading the government in these critical times.

NARRATOR: A week later, in mid-September, there was a coup attempt.

JACK VALENTI: The thing that worried Johnson -- and constantly worried him -- was the instability of the South Vietnamese government. I guess you might call -- the coat of arms of the Vietnamese government was a turnstile, for God's sake. And, and I remember very vividly somebody would come in his office and say, "Looks like there's a coup beginning in Vietnam." There'd be another coup. You know, coups were like fleas on a dog, and Johnson said, "I don't want to hear any more about this coup shit. I've had enough of it, and we've got to find a way to stabilize those people out there."

NARRATOR: That proved difficult. Khanh turned the government over to civilians in the fall, but continued to intrigue as head of the armed forces. The political turmoil intensified. In February, with Ambassador Taylor's approval, Khanh's own military colleagues rebelled against him and banished him to the United Nations. Though a stable government remained elusive, the campaign of bombing North Vietnam began. It was called "Rolling Thunder."

WILLIAM BUNDY: We thought that at a certain point -- and in conjunction with a situation within the South that was turned around -- it would be a decisive thing in getting Hanoi to say, "All right, we can't get there now, we will fall back, not abandon the objective of taking over the South, but drop it for now." We never had the view that bombing would bring about quick results; certainly not on the essentially measured scale that was actually carried out. We thought it would cut down the amount of the infiltration -- that by hitting the supply lines, you'd make it much more difficult.

GEORGE BALL: I had been a director of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey at the, toward the end of the Second World War. And we'd made a detailed study of the effects of strategic bombing on not only the German war economy, but on the psychology of the German people. I was convinced that we were not going to achieve our will by bombing the North; that in the first place, it was a fairly primitive industrial society, and that there weren't the kind of targets that were adapted for strategic bombing. And secondly, I was convinced that we would never break the will of a determined people by simply bombing; and in fact, we would probably tend to unite them more than ever.

NARRATOR: The Thanh Hoa Bridge, 80 miles from Hanoi, was an important target in the spring of 1965. It was bombed and repaired, year after year.

GENERAL WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: When the bombing program started, I realized that the airfields -- and we had three jet-capable airfields -- were extremely vulnerable. If that strategy was to be a viable one, we had to protect those airfields. I feared that the Vietnamese did not have the capability of protecting the American aircraft on those airfields, and therefore, my first request for troops was associated with protecting the airfields.

NARRATOR: The President granted Westmoreland's request with little debate. On March 8, 1965, 3,500 U.S. Marines landed to protect the air base at Danang. The decision to deploy these first Marines was not part of a plan for a massive troop buildup. But 200,000 troops would be committed by the end of the year.

AMBASSADOR MAXWELL TAYLOR: My opinion was: Let's not bring any ground forces in until we have to. Once you get into this business, how do you turn back?" No one was blind about the danger of that first soldier, marine coming ashore. I certainly wasn't. Once that decision was made

and the Marines started coming ashore, as far as I was concerned, that's that. Let's go, boys, as fast as we can receive these troops logistically and have a real mission for them.

NARRATOR: Three weeks after the Marines landed, the Vietcong attacked the American Embassy in Saigon.

NEWSREEL, March 1965:

Voice #1: We need a stretcher over here!

Voice #2: Stretcher?

Voice #3: Right over here is one!

Voice #4: I want some help over here!

PRESS CONFERENCE, April 1965:

Reporter: Mr. Secretary...more Americans?

Robert McNamara: No, principally logistical support, arms, munitions, training assistance.

Reporter: As many as 5,000 sir? We've heard this report...

Robert McNamara: No, I'm not discussing primarily additional personnel.

NARRATOR: In early April, Johnson tried to keep the troop deployments a secret. In fact, two additional Marine battalions had already hit the beach as Secretary McNamara spoke. Others followed, week by week, with little fanfare. Seventy-two thousand troops were committed that spring.

DEAN RUSK: One of the reasons for this gradualness in our buildup of resistance in South Vietnam was due to the fact that we did not want to present Moscow and Hanoi with a major new situation during any given week, which would require them to go through an orgasm of decision-making based upon worldwide strategic considerations. And so each week was not all that different than the week before.

NARRATOR: In early April, Johnson also changed the mission of troops. The passive defense of air bases lasted less than a month.

NEWSREEL, April 1965:

Reporter: When the Marines were first landed at Danang, we were told that the objective was to defend the air base. How do you resolve that, sir, with your statements in Saigon that their objective is to kill the Vietcong -- to seek them out and kill them?

General Wallace Greene, Jr., Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps: Well, I did say that; I think that goes along with our objective, our mission, our assignment to defend that big complex at Danang and Phu Bai. You can't defend a place like that by sitting on your ditty-box. You've got to get out and aggressively patrol. And that's what our people are doing. And the one thing I emphasized to them while I was out there was to find these Vietcong and kill them.

NARRATOR: A U.S. president, for the first time, had authorized ground troops for offensive operations in Vietnam. Their patrols were limited to a 50-mile radius of coastal bases. Johnson was moving with caution. But these additional troops -- and their expanded role -- were also designed to show Ho Chi Minh his determination. Five days after he committed them, Johnson made Ho an offer.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON at Johns Hopkins University:

The vast Mekong River can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own T.V.A.

NARRATOR: Johnson offered Ho a vast development project to benefit all of Southeast Asia if Ho would abandon his goals.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON: And we remain ready with this purpose, for unconditional discussions.

BILL MOYERS: Coming back in the helicopter from that speech in 1965 at Johns Hopkins University -- where he had promised a T.V.A. for the Mekong valley, if only Ho Chi Minh would be reasonable -- he leaned across to an assistant, put his hand on his knee, and said, "Old Ho can't turn that down. Old Ho can't turn that down." You see, if Ho Chi Minh had been George Meany, Lyndon Johnson would have had a deal.

PRESS CONFERENCE, April 1965:

Reporter: Mr. Secretary, what is your reaction to the announcement from

the Communist side, rejecting our offer of negotiation?

Robert McNamara: Well, we regret that. As President Johnson said Saturday, there've been many disappointments over the past week; that is one. We stand ready and willing to talk anytime, any place.

Reporter: Has our bombing attack really hurt the North Vietnamese?

Robert McNamara: I don't think there's any question but what it has. In particular, during the past two weeks, we've concentrated on bridges and the routes of communication and destroyed many of these, and this can't help but delay the movement of men and material to the Communists in the South.

NARRATOR: This film was staged by the East Germans. But the message was true. The bombing campaign was not working. Supplies from North Vietnam were reaching far into the South.

BILL MOYERS: In the spring of 1965, every report -- the CIA, the military, the embassy, independent observers who had been there -- were saying Vietnam is on the verge of collapse. And the President says, "I feel like a hitchhiker caught in a hailstorm on a Texas highway. I can't run, I can't hide, and I can't make it stop."

NARRATOR: By the spring of 1965, the war had changed. Large units of Vietcong replaced guerrillas as the main fighting force. In June they destroyed the military outpost of Dong Xoai. And much of the village. Saigon lost 800 of its best troops. The army of South Vietnam was near collapse. The civilian government did collapse at that time. And the military took over.

NGUYEN CAO KY: I asked all of them -- 60 or 70 of them, you know, in the room. I said, "Okay -- ah, one more time. Anyone want to be prime minister?" And they said no. So Thieu said, "I propose Ky." And all of them just stood up and accept the offer. But then I, I didn't give them the answer. I said, "I have to go back and talk with my wife first." And when I told her about that offer, you know, she was not excited. She said, "Oh no! Not that job! Not as a prime minister!" Ha, ha. I'm not a good politician. I'm not a good diplomat. You know, I think all I know, the only thing I can do well is, you know, flying the airplane. I said, "Well? What can I do now?"

GENERAL WILLIAM WESTMORELAND, July 1965:

I feel it's important at this juncture that we prepare for the long pull.

NARRATOR: The situation was desperate. Westmoreland conferred in July with Secretary McNamara and General Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He had asked for an immediate troop increase to 125,000 men, 200,000 by year's end.

Johnson approved the request while McNamara was in Saigon. The President then had a series of high level meetings staged as a genuine debate, to seek consensus on the decision he had quietly made.

JACK VALENTI (Presidential aide): I remember him turning to Wheeler, and he said to him, "You're asking for 200,000 more men now. What happens if in two, three, four years you ask me for 500,000 men?" (A very prophetic statement.) "What do you expect me to do? How can I respond to it? What makes you think Ho Chi Minh won't match us for every man we send in?" And another time to the group he said, "We've got two questions that we've got to answer. Can Westerners fight a war in Asian jungles? And, number two, how on earth can we fight a war under the direction of others whose governments topple like bowling pins?" He said, "Now somebody answer those questions for me."

GEORGE BALL (Undersecretary of State): In explaining to the President the concern that I felt about a mounting escalation, I said to him, "You know, once on the tiger's back, we can't pick the time to dismount. You're going to lose control of this situation, and this could be very serious."

BILL MOYERS: Secretary McNamara framed the three options. Option number one was to cut our losses and get out. Option number two was a middle course. Option number three was to give the military in Vietnam what it wanted. Listen to the way the first option was phrased: "cut our losses and withdraw under the best conditions that can be arranged. Almost certainly, conditions humiliating the United States and very

damaging to our future effectiveness on the world scene." Now you're president, and you have this memorandum from the secretary of defense, and it says you can cut our losses and withdraw under the best conditions; however, it's going to make a fool of you in the world. I mean, that was an option the very framing of which presumed its rejection.

GEORGE BALL: Our reputation as a nation consisted of many things. Not the least of which was that we had some sense of perspective and, therefore, had some judgment. While many of our allied countries were beginning to think that we had, we were out of our minds to pursue such a futile war.

DEAN RUSK (Secretary of State): Peace has been maintained because people in certain other capitals would say to themselves, "Now look, comrades, we'd better be a little careful here because those damn fool Americans just might do something about it." If that question in their minds got to be a sense of certainty that we would not do something about it, then I think we'd be exposed to very great dangers.

GEORGE BALL: I found him the most sympathetic of all of the people in the entourage. He was the one who seemed to take my cautionary views most seriously. He was the one who seemed to be probing more and more deeply for a way out. But he could never reconcile extrication with his personal commitment that he would not be the first president to lose a war.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, July 28, 1965:

We do not want an expanding struggle with consequences that no one can foresee. Nor will we bluster or bully or flaunt our power. But we will not surrender. And we will not retreat. We intend to convince the Communists that we cannot be defeated by force of arms or by superior power. I have asked the commanding general, General Westmoreland, what more he needs to meet this mounting aggression. He has told me, and we will meet his needs.

NARRATOR: There was no major address before Congress. Johnson already had his Tonkin Gulf Resolution. And there was no major announcement on prime time television. Johnson disclosed his decision in a press conference at midday.

MCGEORGE BUNDY (National Security Adviser): I think it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the President wanted as low-keyed an announcement as he could get, and as little energetic public debate as possible.

DEAN RUSK: We did make a deliberate decision not to create a war fever in this country. You didn't see members of the armed forces or units of the armed forces parading through American cities. You didn't see pretty movie stars out selling bonds in factories and things like that -- all the things we did during World War II -- because we felt that in this nuclear world, where thousands of megatons are lying around in the hands of frail human beings, it's just too dangerous for an entire people to become too angry.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, August 3, 1965:

We are going to do everything we can with our left hand, to negotiate an agreement that will allow people to breathe free independently. Independent of any ideology of ours, or of anyone else's. Give them the right of choice. And if we do that, we'll come home tomorrow.

NARRATOR: As Lyndon Johnson spoke on the White House lawn, a Marine rifle company left Danang for a cluster of hamlets nearby. Vietcong from this area had recently hit Danang in a mortar attack. And they had shot seven marines on an earlier sweep.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON:

If I resist them, if I deter them, if we keep our commitment that three presidents have made -- President Eisenhower, President Kennedy and the present president -- then the people say, "Well, you should come on home. What happens there doesn't matter." If you stay there, there's some that say, "Well, you ought to get it over with in a hurry." So some want to go and blow up every-thing. Some want to come and blow up nothing and leave and get out and forget them.

We're trying to do the reasonable thing, to say that power and brute force and aggression are not going to prevail. You can't do this thing by force.

Now let's sit down and reason it out, and let's try to allow these people a choice. That's what I'm trying so hard to do, and that's what I need your help on.

Why, oh why, oh why don't people concern themselves with a country that's trying to maintain her independence from aggression? That's being invaded?

NARRATOR: Johnson called it invasion. Hanoi called it liberation. In the fall of 1965, three North Vietnamese regiments massed in the Central Highlands. Nearly two years had passed since Johnson renewed the U.S. commitment to defend South Vietnam. Nearly two years had passed since Ho Chi Minh renewed his commitment to liberate the South. Now their two armies braced for battle. Westmoreland feared the North Vietnamese would cut South Vietnam in two. He would block them with his skytroopers, the First Air Cavalry.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON:

Now, America wins the wars that she undertakes; make no mistake about it. And we have declared war on ignorance and illiteracy. We have declared war on poverty. We have declared war on disease. And we have declared war on tyranny and aggression. And we not only stand for these things, but we're willing to stand up and die for these things.

NARRATOR: Westmoreland sent the Air Cavalry in search of Hanoi's army, poised in a river valley, at the foot of the Chu Pong Mountains.

For the first time, in the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley, Americans fought the North Vietnamese -- face to face.

For the first time, B-52s supported troops in the field.

And for the first time, to Americans, Vietnam meant a major new war.

PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, January 12, 1966:

How many men who listen to me tonight have served their nation in other wars? How very many are not here to listen? The war in Vietnam is not like these other wars. Yet, finally, war is always the same. It is young men dying in the fullness of their promise. It is trying to kill a man that you do not even know well enough to hate. Therefore, to know war is to know that there is still madness in this world. For we have children to teach, and we have sick to be cured, and we have men to be freed. There are poor to be lifted up, and there are cities to be built, and there is a world to be helped. Yet, we do what we must. I am hopeful, and I will try with the best I can, with every-thing I've got, to end this battle and to return our sons to their desires. Yet, as long as others will challenge America's security, and test the dearness of our beliefs with fire and steel, then we must stand, or see the promise of two centuries tremble.

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